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The latest news from Missouri SHPO's
Architectural Preservation Services Team

Matters



The Flounder House: A St. Louis vernacular house type

Anyone who lives or works in St. Louis – especially if they work in historic preservation – is no doubt familiar with the so-called “flounder” house, a type of house dating back to the 19th century. It is sometimes also called a “half-flounder” or “half-house.” The flounder has one wall significantly higher than the other to provide loft or attic space. The term “flounder” compares this asymmetrical house type to the asymmetrical flatfish that has both eyes on one side of its head. Although flounder houses occur in many other cities, especially on the east coast, St. Louis appears to have the largest collection, with over 275 extant as of 2015.

Flounders are most concentrated in the oldest parts of the city, east of Jefferson Avenue, with large clusters in Soulard, Carondelet and the Patch neighborhood; some west of Jefferson in the vicinity of Cass and on both sides of Gravois; and Old North St. Louis. While the flounder is generally considered to be an urban architectural form, some flounders were built in areas that were essentially rural in 1875, suggesting the flounder was not strictly an urban form.

In 2015 the City of St. Louis Cultural Resources Office completed a survey of flounder houses in St. Louis, and described in their report, “Not an Accidental Form: The Flounder House as a Vernacular Building Type in St. Louis City.” Very few studies of flounders exist,

so this broad and deep study is a valuable contribution to scholarship on the flounder house type. Flounders are discussed in a few Missouri National Register nominations, chiefly the one for Soulard, but the only published study is Christopher Martin's article on flounders in Alexandria, Virginia, where there were only 17 extant examples in 1986.

Martin examined various proposed explanations for the flounder house's popularity, but found the following theory to be the most convincing: the single-slope roof offered ease of construction to builders by eliminating rafter-to-rafter joinery. This streamlined the building process, making construction faster and easier. Thus it was a practical option for low-cost housing. By researching historic property records and tax records, CRO staff found that many of the flounders in Soulard were used as rooming houses in the 19th century, with occupants who were typically laborers who frequently changed residences.



Above: Townhouse flounders in Soulard: facades on Menard in the foreground and rear views of flounders on South 11th Street at top of view, in the Soulard neighborhood, from Compton & Dry Pictorial of 1875, Plate 28, taken from the 2015 CRO report.

The 2015 CRO report found that nearly 90% of the extant flounders in St. Louis were built prior to 1883; approximately two-thirds were built prior to 1875. Most of the surviving flounders are load-bearing brick structures, with only 9% wood-framed construction. The majority are either two or two-and-a-half stories, though nearly 40% are one or one-and-a-half stories. The following table outlines the distribution of flounder house dates and characteristics found in CRO's survey:

TIME PERIOD	1, 1-1/2 STORIES	2, 2-1/2 STORIES	HIPPED FRONT ROOF	BRICK	FRAME	TOTAL PER PERIOD	NOTES
1875 & earlier	72	109	55	167	15	182	1 three-story building
1876-1883	23	42	39	60	5	65	
1884-1909	7	22	15	24	5	29	
Post-1909	0	1	1	0	0	1	1 concrete block building
TOTAL FLOUNDERS	102	174	110	251	25	277	Total includes the 2 buildings noted above
Percentage of Total	36.8%	62.8%	39.7%	90.6%	9.0%	100.0%	

Above: Summary of dates of construction and common features among the extant flounder houses in the City of St. Louis in 2015, from “Not an Accidental Form: The Flounder House as a Vernacular Building Type in St. Louis City,” September 2015. Cultural Resources Office, Planning and Development Agency, City of St. Louis.

Flounders could be built at various locations on the city’s lots: at the building line near the street, mid-lot or at the alley. By far the most common location is at the side lot line with the taller blind (windowless) wall at that lot line. In some cases this could become a party wall; generally it offered privacy to the adjacent property. Placement against the side lot line afforded a wider – yet still narrow – side yard, which was an important consideration because lots tended to be long and narrow.



Left: Rear view showing application of a dual half-flounder on a free-standing brick house. Notice the sally port or “mousehole” that allowed passage through the lot. **Right:** A flounder house in Soulard that faces the sidewalk; entrance is provided from a rear porch. Only a few flounders are positioned with their long sides facing the street like this. Photos taken from the Soulard Neighborhood Historic District National Register nomination.

The wood-framed side porch, or gallery, is another common feature of flounders, especially those built before 1883. Two-story houses were often built with rear wings (the “rear flounder ell”) that were usually narrower than the main block of the house. The gallery enabled builders to position the circulation system outside of the brick walls, providing access to various rooms of the upper story when the dwelling was occupied by more than one family. A gallery also provided sheltered outdoor space during the milder months of the year.



Above: A small number of extant flounders were built for mixed use with storefronts on the ground story and residential space above. This mixed-use building in the Soulard/Page District has a commercial storefront (left photo); at the rear is a flounder ell wing for residential use (right photo). It retains its historic gallery, which is accessed from the rear of the property, with a staircase to provide access to the upper level. Both photos from Google Earth.

The CRO report identifies the shed roof with its distinctive triangular silhouette as the most common characteristic of extant flounders, although a large group of flounders – some 40% – have a hipped front roof.



Left: This 1888 flounder on Southwest Avenue with a hipped-front roof is unusual in having a front entrance; it also has a small recessed rear corner porch rather than a full gallery. **Right:** This one-story flounder has a low-pitched hipped-front roof with a small dormer window, another common feature. Both photos from the 2015 CRO report.



Above: These two-story flounders with hipped-front roofs are rare examples that incorporate Federal and Italianate decorative elements that elevate them to the level of “high style.” Photos from the 2015 CRO report.

Then there is the semi-detached flounder; the casual observer could be forgiven for perceiving these examples to be gabled houses rather than two flounders sharing a party wall. SHPO has encountered a flounder that at one time had a semi-detached “partner” that had collapsed at some point, leaving the party wall exposed as it had never been intended to do. After the collapse of one flounder, the remaining flounder is still structurally sound.



Above: A pair of brick flounders (left) and a pair of wood-framed flounders (right) share the same variation: one unit has a side gallery and the other does not. Both photos from the 2015 CRO report.

In short, the flounder is a vernacular building type that, while not unique to St. Louis, is heavily represented in St. Louis while not found elsewhere in Missouri. To the student of American vernacular architecture, the flounder is far less familiar than other house types like the shotgun, the I house, the Foursquare, and other common forms. Vernacular building designs were informed by local practices using locally available materials and locally trained builders. The flounder illustrates a common principle of vernacular architecture, which is that builders (be they carpenters or masons) learned from their environment and from other builders, often replicating the techniques practiced within the local environment, and imparting a distinctive “look” to the areas in which they worked.

Sources:

“Not an Accidental Form: The Flounder House as a Vernacular Building Type in St. Louis City,” September 2015. Cultural Resources Office, Planning and Development Agency, City of St. Louis. Jan Cameron, Survey Director, and Betsy H. Bradley, Survey Report Author. Cultural Resources Office staff members Andrea Gagen and Robert Bettis were instrumental in the completion of the survey and report, and intern Lorraine Nunley assisted in many facets of the project. [Not-an-Accidental-Form.pdf \(stlouis-mo.gov\)](#)

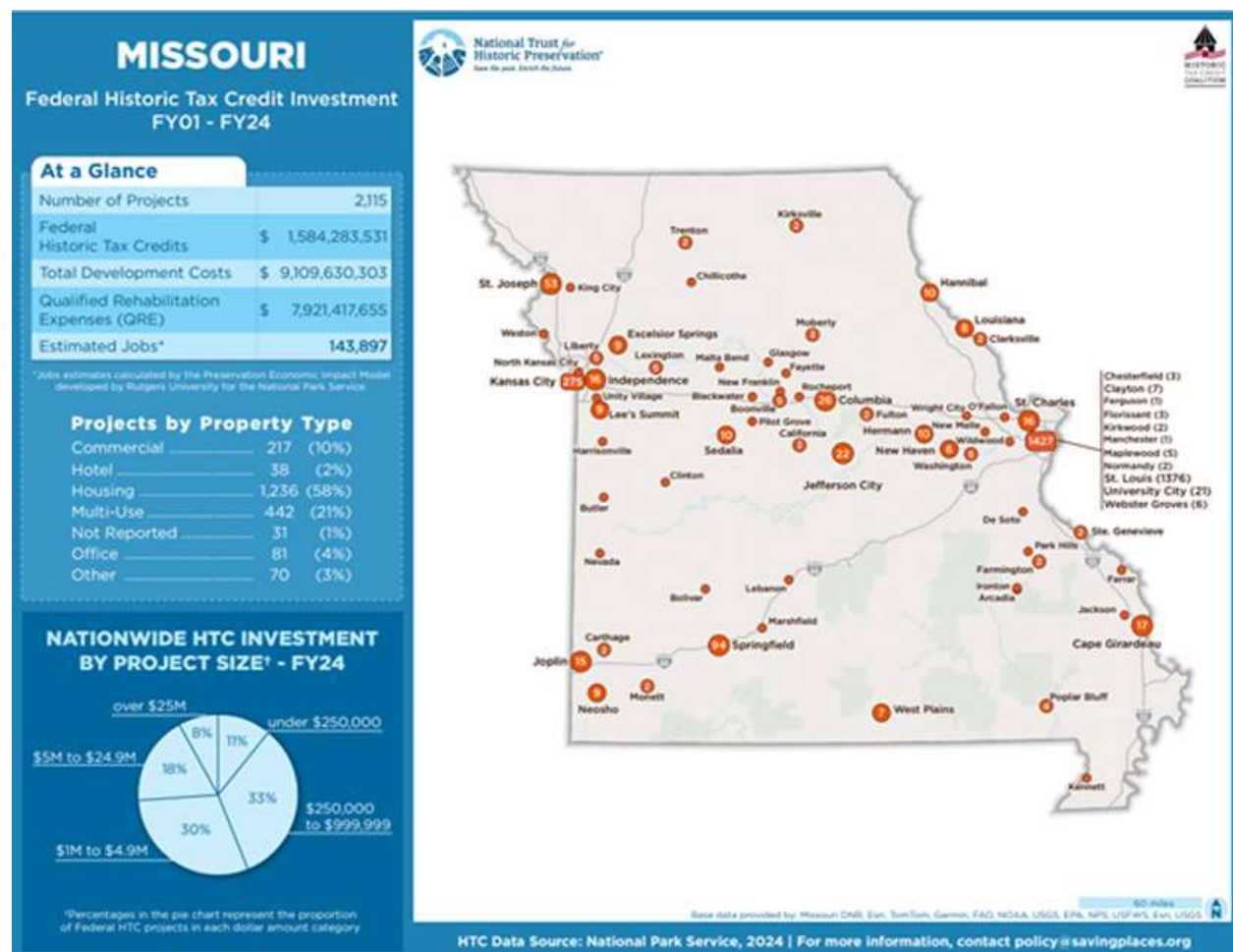
Martin, Christopher. “‘Hope Deferred’: The Origin and Development of Alexandria’s Flounder House,” *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*. Vol. 2 (1986): 111-119.

National Trust for Historic Preservation updates Federal Tax Credit map

If you attended SHPO’s Preservation Symposium in May 2025 you will already have seen this infographic, but it has been updated to reflect all Federal Historic Tax Credit projects in Missouri for Federal FYs 2001-2024. (Note: Federal FY 2025 just ended on Sept. 30, 2025.) This infographic shows the total number of rehabilitation projects in Missouri that received

Federal HTC's (2,115); the total amount of federal tax credits (over \$1.5 billion); the total development costs (over \$9 billion); and the number of jobs created by those rehabilitations (over 143,000). This means that the federal tax investment of \$1.5 billion resulted in a total investment in Missouri's economy of over \$9 billion, which is an incredible return on investment. The infographic also shows the breakdown of projects by property type, with the largest category being Housing at 58%. Keep in mind that the Federal HTC program is only available to income-generating properties, so owner-occupied housing is not included in these figures.

It is widely recognized that Missouri's generous State HTC program contributes to our high volume of Federal HTC projects, as investors can combine the federal and state credits if the property meets both sets of requirements.



The infographic also includes a pie chart of the Nationwide HTC Investment by Project Size for Federal FY 2024. Close to half of the HTC projects nationwide (44%) were under \$1 million in total project cost. For a closer look at this infographic and a list of ALL 2,115 projects receiving Federal HTC's in this period, see <https://cdn.savingplaces.org/2025/05/29/14/35/16/356d7ee1-2618-43da-a6e9-46c610f0265a/MO.pdf>

A common misconception about the federal program is that it only supports large projects and projects in large cities. According to NPS,

- Half of the certified rehabilitation projects were in low- to moderate-income areas.
- More than three-quarters (78%) of all projects were in economically distressed areas.
- Nearly a third (29%) of the projects certified were in communities of less than 50,000 people.

See [Federal historic preservation tax incentive projects certified by National Park Service generated \\$7 billion in GDP, 122,000 jobs in 2022 - Office of Communications \(U.S. National Park Service\) \(nps.gov\)](#)

Certified Local Districts

Do you know what a Certified Local District is? **A CLD is a local historic district that has been certified by NPS as substantially meeting the National Register criteria for listing.** It is not the same as a National Register-listed district, but contributing properties in a CLD are eligible for Historic Tax Credits without having to go through the rigorous process of getting NR-listed. **The CLD process is faster and more streamlined than the NR-listing process, making it a quicker path to tax credit eligibility.** CLD status confers the benefits of National Register status along with review of exterior alterations and proposed demolitions under the local designation and individual historic district standards.

The historic properties contributing to a CLD still need to meet the National Register criteria. Any community can create a local historic district and can apply to make it a CLD, so long as they have (or enact) a local preservation ordinance; your municipality does not have to be a Certified Local Government to do so (but it helps). For cities that already have a local preservation ordinance in place, creating a CLD should be a faster process than creating a National Register Historic District.

CLDs are specific to the Historic Tax Credit program. The CLD program was established in 1978 along with the tax credit program under 36 CFR 67 with the principal purpose of extending eligibility for HTCs to properties beyond those listed in the National Register. The intent was for more property owners to be able to take advantage of the incentives.

What is the Submission Process?

Submission requirements to certify a local district are:

1. A letter from a local official requesting certification.
2. A copy of local statute(s) or ordinance(s).
3. District documentation or designation report.
4. SHPO recommendation.

What local district ordinances are required?

Local historic districts are created by municipalities using **local district ordinances** under the auspices of state enabling legislation and local preservation ordinances. Such local historic districts are reviewed by local community members as part of the process, and that local review provides the initial vetting and oversight to ensure the district has historic significance. Once a municipality has created a local historic district, it may seek certification of the district from NPS.

There are two main requirements for the local statutes and ordinances described in the regulations:

1. The local law “must contain criteria which will substantially achieve the purpose of preserving and rehabilitating properties of historic significance to the district.”
2. The local law must provide for a “duly designated review body, such as a review board or commission, with the power to review proposed alterations to structures of historic significance” within the district’s boundaries.

There are a wide variety of types of ordinances, and in some cities more than one may need to be submitted together to meet the requirements. For example, some cities enact a preservation ordinance that establishes the goal of preserving historic properties in the city and then later enact a historic district ordinance that establishes the district and architectural review commission. Both of those together would meet the requirements.

What district documentation is required?

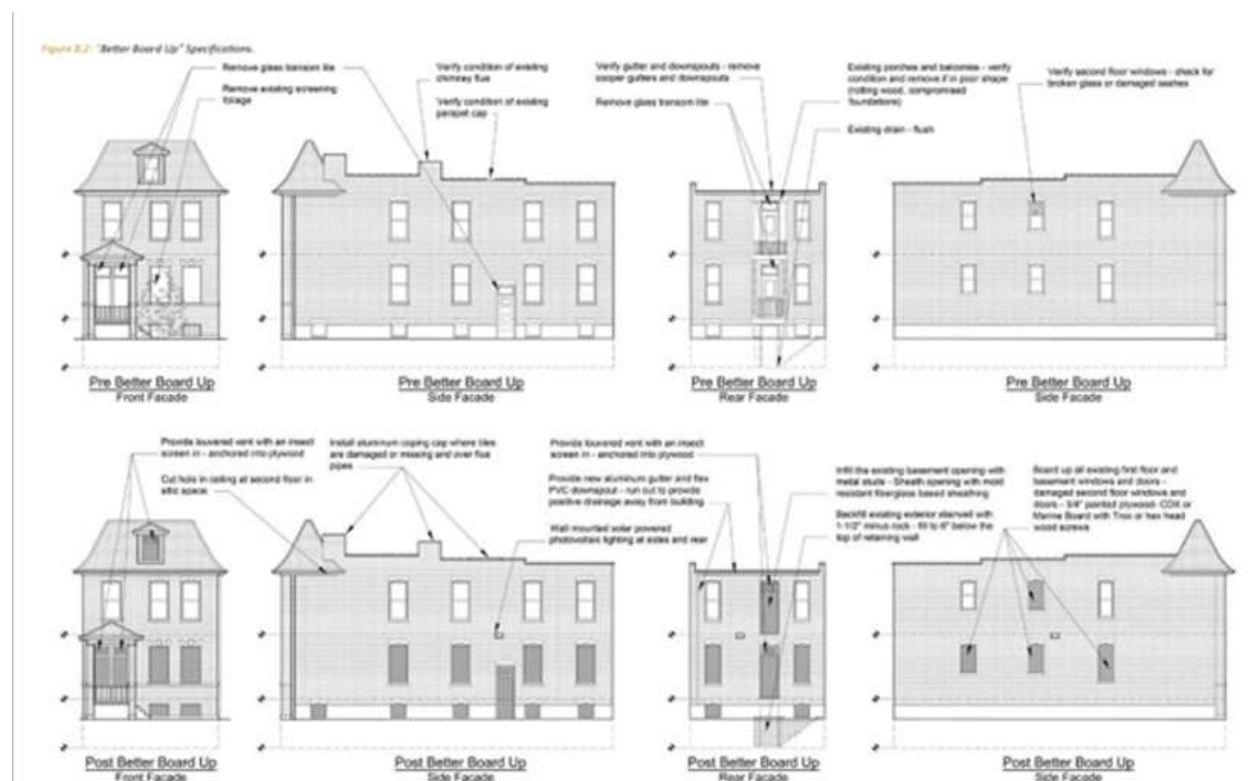
As with a National Register Historic District, CLD boundaries must be justified and must conform to NPS guidance. The narrative should describe the methodology used for making these determinations. District documentation for a CLD request must include the following:

1. A description of the general physical or historical qualities that make this a district.
 - Explanation for the choice of boundaries for the district.
 - Descriptions of typical architectural styles and types of buildings in the district.
2. A concise statement of why the district has significance, including an explanation of the areas and periods of significance.
 - Why it meets National Register criteria for listing (see 36 CFR part 60).
 - The relevant criteria should be identified (A, B, C, and D).
3. A definition of what types of properties contribute and do not contribute to the significance of the district as well as an estimate of the percentage of the properties within the district that do not contribute to its significance.
4. A map showing all district properties with, if possible, identification of contributing and noncontributing properties; the map should clearly show the district’s boundaries.
5. Photographs of typical areas in the district as well as major types of contributing and noncontributing properties; all photographs should be keyed to the map.

Missouri currently has 18 CLDs, but we could have many more if local governments began using this preservation tool more often. To learn more about creating a Certified Local District, please contact SHPO at 573-751-7858.

Securing vacant buildings for future rehabilitation

Vacant buildings are a major concern for preservationists, municipalities, developers, residents and business owners in communities of all sizes throughout Missouri. Vacant and abandoned buildings frequently suffer from water and fire damage, vandalism and theft of copper pipes and gutters among other things, all of which can speed up a building's deterioration or even collapse. When a vacant building cannot be rehabilitated immediately, it is important to secure that building so that it may be rehabilitated in the future. A strategy called "Better Board Up" can help communities manage vacant properties from the time they become vacant until they are sold to a new owner, as outlined in the *Gravois-Jefferson Historic Neighborhoods Plan* adopted by the City of St. Louis Planning Commission in 2018.



Two top priorities are keeping out human intruders and keeping water out of buildings; these concerns go hand-in-hand because theft and vandalism can create conditions that make the building more vulnerable to fire and water damage. When vandals break windows or pull down copper gutters, they make the building more vulnerable to water infiltration, mold proliferation and animal infestations. The inability to dry buildings out once they have

experienced water infiltration is also a large area of concern. Some simple steps can ensure proper stabilization and weatherization, and help preserve vacant buildings for future uses:

1. **Install wall-mounted solar-powered photovoltaic lighting at the sides and rear of the building** to discourage trespassers.
2. **Remove existing screening foliage from the front of the building.** This reduces hiding areas for potential vandals or intruders. Also, when trees are too close, they can drop limbs on roofs, or vines can grow up the side of a building, causing damage.
3. **Remove copper gutters and downspouts. Provide new aluminum gutters and flex PVC downspouts.** Thieves often use rigid downspouts to pull down copper gutters, leaving the walls with no protection from water that runs directly over brick, mortar and wood trim and other features, hastening their deterioration. Removing the copper gutters and replacing them with aluminum will deter this kind of damage and protect the historic fabric inside and out.
4. **Install aluminum coping caps where tiles are damaged or missing, and over flue pipes.** This will help prevent water leaking through the roof.
5. **Create ventilation areas.** This can be achieved by cutting holes into attic spaces at the eaves, for example. A lot of fake mansard buildings lack any ventilation into the attic space.
6. **Provide any louvered vents with an insect screen, anchored into plywood.**
7. **On the rear façade, remove existing porches and balconies if they are in poor shape** (i.e., if they have rotting wood or compromised foundations). Wood porches, especially at the rear, were often poorly constructed afterthoughts. If they collapse, they will take the brick with them on occasion. *Caveat: in rehabilitating historic properties, it is important to retain the historic materials as much as possible. If they can be repaired, they should be retained. If there are decorative details, these should be adequately documented for reproduction.*
8. **Board up all existing first floor and basement windows and doors, as well as any damaged second floor windows and doors,** using 3/4" painted plywood; it's recommended to use CDX or Marine Board plywood with Torx or hex head wood screws.
9. **Infill any existing basement openings with metal studs; sheath the opening with mold-resistant fiberglass-based sheathing.**
10. **Backfill any existing exterior basement stairwell with 1-1/2" minus rock, filling it to 6" below the top of the retaining wall.**

Securing vacant buildings may be expensive, but these steps are worth the cost because they help combat the negative impacts of abandoned buildings on public health, safety, property values and neighborhood pride. And they help make sure that the buildings may be rehabilitated sometime down the road by protecting the existing building fabric.

These tips and the illustration above come from the *Gravois-Jefferson Historic Neighborhoods Plan* which you can access at <https://www.gravoisjeffersonplanning.org>. The planning team that prepared this report included Rise Community Development, Dutchtown South Community Corporation, Development Strategies, UrbanWerks Architecture and Design and a resident steering committee. It was adopted by the City of St. Louis Planning Commission as a Neighborhood Plan and a supplement to the City's

Comprehensive Plan on May 2, 2018. We would like to thank architect Rob Wagstaff for bringing this information to SHPO's attention and for providing input on this story.

National Trust Grant awarded to Historic Florissant, Inc./Florissant Old Town Partners

The National Trust for Historic Preservation announced that it has awarded grants valued at over \$292,000 for preservation projects and historic interiors to 31 organizations in 25 states. One of these awardees is in Missouri: **Historic Florissant, Inc./Florissant Old Town Partners** in Florissant, Missouri, received a grant from the **Cynthia Woods Mitchell Fund for Historic Interiors**. The grant award is in the amount of \$7,411 to restore the interior of the **1870 Reeb House** following a fire that gutted the property in 2020. The Second-Empire home will receive all new drywall installed by the Mid-America Sisterhood of Carpenters and Missouri Women in Trades and will return to use as a residential unit once completed. The Reeb House is one of the last remaining 19th-century French-style homes in Florissant, as reported last year in Spectrum News (<https://spectrumlocalnews.com/mo/st-louis/news/2024/02/26/restoration-plans-underway-to-save-historic-florissant-home>). Congratulations!

Source: https://savingplaces.org/stories/favrot-mitchell-hart-2025?utm_medium=email&utm_source=newsletter&utm_campaign=weekly

SHPO welcomes two new team members



SHPO is very fortunate to have hired an intern this year, an archaeologist in the **Review, Compliance and Records** section. **Riley Drechsler** joined SHPO as the GIS Intern in June 2025. Previously, she completed her bachelor's degree in anthropology at the University of Wisconsin – Oshkosh and recently finished her master's degree in anthropology at the University of Missouri – Columbia. Since starting at SHPO, Riley has been mapping new archaeological sites and surveys in GIS, identifying and adding missing data from existing entries, and occasionally helping the Missouri State Parks Cultural Resources Management Program with fieldwork as part of their survey team. In her free time, Riley enjoys Wisconsin sports (especially the Packers), watching movies, spending time with friends and enjoying the outdoors. She has been enjoying her time with SHPO and appreciates both the warm welcome from the office and the opportunity to learn more about archaeology and the Section 106 process.

Geographical Information Systems refers to a surveying technique that links on-the-ground field observations to precise, satellite-based geolocation technology. GIS recording is fundamental to SHPO's recordkeeping for both architectural and archaeological surveys. Whenever you check our online maps, the data you see reflected on the screen has been created and mapped through GIS.



We are pleased to announce that **Ethan Prior** has joined the State Historic Preservation Office as an architectural historian in the **National Register and Survey** section. Ethan's responsibilities will include reviewing draft nominations for listing to the National Register of Historic Places, historic and architectural surveys and eligibility assessments. He will also assist with outreach on various preservation topics such as cemetery preservation workshops and presentations on the survey and nomination processes.

Ethan is from Mexico, Missouri, and recently completed his master's degree in historic preservation at Southeast Missouri State University, specializing in museum collections. He received his bachelor of arts degree in history with a German minor.

Ethan spent this summer interning at the Battle of Pilot Knob State Historic Site, where his duties included interacting with visitors and updating the museum collection's database and proper storage methods. While at SEMO, Ethan organized and cataloged the Department of History and Anthropology's architectural materials and elements collection, and embarked on a project to nominate the A.C. Brase Arena in Cape Girardeau for National Register listing. He is particularly interested in the post-1950s cold war era.

In our next Issue:

The Missouri Preservation Conference in St. Louis at the beginning of October was extremely interesting, with a wide variety of speakers and topics, hands-on workshops and events. In the November issue of *Preservation Matters* we will discuss the conference at length and some of the things we learned. Until then, congratulations to Riley Price, the Missouri Preservation Board of Directors and all the volunteers who worked to make the annual conference a success!



On the SHPO Calendar



Certified Local Government Forum, Jefferson City

SHPO will host our annual CLG Forum designed for members of Certified Local Governments to learn more about historic preservation and to share their experiences with one another. The forum is open to CLGs from across the state. Registration is \$25 per person to cover the cost of the catered lunch. Pre-registration is required at

https://icampmo1.usedirect.com/MSPWeb/Activities/Details.aspx?session_id=179370&back_url=fi9BY3Rpdml0aWVzL1NIYXJjaC5hc3B4

The goal of *Preservation Matters* – *The latest news from Missouri SHPO's Architectural Preservation Services Team* is to increase communication and transparency between SHPO's historic tax credit reviewers, the users of the program, and any other stakeholders or members of the public.

Comments? Questions? Suggestions? Please let us know! If there's anything you'd like to see covered, or any questions that we can explain, we will be happy to include those in a future issue of *Preservation Matters*.

To be added to or removed from the Architectural Preservation Services mailing list for this newsletter and other announcements, please send an email to Elizabeth.Hornbeck@dnr.mo.gov.

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